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ABSTRACT

Since Malaysian school children spend a considerable portion of their lives in school, whether in activities arranged for them, or interacting with peers, there is a great deal to learn about their perceptions of schooling and classroom experiences. This paper discusses the meaning of schooling to these students, particularly, how all these school experiences relate to the students' understanding of themselves and their development. This information can provide useful feedback about the teachers' instructional strategies, and the degree of agreement or lack thereof between students' interpretation of teachers' instructional behaviors and what teachers really intend. Students between the ages of 13 and 15 years from three schools wrote essays on the meaning of schooling. Three hundred essays were randomly selected for analysis, of which 100 essays written by female students were analyzed. Knowledge (getting an education) and social (friendships) themes were frequently mentioned. Schooling played an important role in instilling positive moral values, self-confidence, and self-discipline. Insights about stress and examinations are also provided. (Contains 15 references.) (DFR)

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SCHOOLING FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF A GROUP OF FEMALE STUDENTS

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

In Malaysia, going to school is a major and consuming activity for many children, their parents as well as their teachers. Witness the flurry of activities at the beginning of each year when school reopens for the new semester as new entrants are initiated into the school life and returnees find their places in the school system. Witness again the annual excitement when public examination results are announced in the media.

Table 1 shows the school enrolment in the public schools for the year beginning 1998.

Table 1: School Enrolment In Public Schools

SCHOOL LEVEL	STUDENTS		TEACHERS	
	Male	Female	Male	Female
Primary Level	1474322	1398105	58519	96310
Secondary Level	931802	957790	40699	61440
Total	4,762,019		256,968	

Source: http://www.eprd.kpm.myEbil2.htm; 12 August 1998

According to the Statistics Department, Malaysia (1997), the estimated figure of individuals below 19 years old is 9,649,700 or about 44.5% of the total population. Out of this figure, 4,762,019 or 49.3 % were attending primary or secondary schools.

School children normally spend about 13 years moving from primary school (6 years) to lower secondary school (3 years) and then to upper secondary level (2 years). The period is considerably longer for the students who go to kindergarten before starting formal schooling and, at the end of their secondary education, spend another year or two before commencing tertiary education.

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School time varies from 5 to 6 1/2 hours daily, the shorter period being for pupils in the primary school while the longer period being for the secondary school students. Thus, it can be seen that the time the children spend in school is a long period.

1.2 Research Question

Although Malaysian school children spend a considerable portion of their lives being in school and being involved in activities arranged for them, there is much to learn about their perceptions of their schooling and classroom experiences. For instance, what are their perception of their teachers, their teachers' instructional behaviors and the intended teaching outcomes? Further, what are their perceptions of the activities organized for them, particularly in terms of their learning and how motivated are they to participate in these activities?

As their time in school is also spent interacting with their peers, what are their perceptions of their peers and the importance of peers in their daily lives? In short, the central question of this research is what is the meaning of schooling to the students? Particularly, how do all these school experiences relate to the students' understanding of themselves and to the development of their selves?

1.3 Why The Need To Know Students' Perceptions Of Schooling

In terms of sheer number, the students easily outnumber the school staff in any school. As Tucker (1979) noted, the students form the major consumers of the teachers' teaching. As such, information about students' classroom experiences can provide useful feedback about the teachers' instructional strategies.

In a similar vein, Weinstein (1983) emphasized the importance of knowing the world of school from the students' perspective. Students are active interpreters of classroom events and are constantly evaluating, forming opinions and making inferences about the causes and effects of teachers' behaviors as well as their friends' and their own behaviors. However, students' perceptions of classroom reality may not always be the same as their teachers' perceptions.

Thus, feedback from the students about their classroom experiences are important not so much from the point of view of teacher evaluation, but more importantly for the purpose of finding out the degree of agreement or lack of it between students' interpretation of teachers' instructional

behaviors and what teachers really intend. A perceptual gap could lead to miscommunication and misunderstanding between them that could hinder the students' learning.

Finally, students' perceptions and interpretations of classroom reality can provide us some ideas of how these experiences relate to their ideas about themselves. They are like windows through which students share their frustration and joy as struggle in their process of self-definition and of 'becoming somebody'.

1.4 Research on Students' Perceptions of Schooling

In recent years, there has been an increasing interest among educators and researchers on students' perceptions of their classroom experiences. Within the research on teacher effectiveness, this interest reflects a shift from traditionally predominantly process-product approach to studying teaching to an increasing focus on mediating process approach. The shift highlights the growing emphasis on the role of students' cognitive process as mediator of the effect of teachers' teaching behaviors on students' learning and achievement. As Good & McCaslin (1992) note, students do think and their thinking mediates teachers' instructional behaviors. They observe that however, there is insufficient solid information for understanding student mediation and they stress that more systematic research on student perceptions is needed.

Nonetheless, there is a growing body of work on students' views of classroom life. Weinstein (1983) provides a good overview of research on students' thoughts about various aspects of schooling. The studies reviewed show that students were actively struggling to make sense of school. They were very sensitive to teacher differential treatment of various student groups, which they used to make inferences about their teachers' expectations of their academic performance. Beside observing and interpreting teachers' behaviors, students were also engaged in monitoring their friends' behaviors, which they used to evaluate their own performance and abilities.

Thus, knowledge about students' perceptions of their classroom reality is useful as it provides the teachers with information about their instructional strategies as well as about pupil-pupil relationship in their classrooms, which can affect the behavior and performance of their students.

1.5 Studies In Malaysia

There has been some effort to study students' perceptions of schooling. For instance, Leong (1982) explored the objectives of schooling among 540 secondary school students, 60 parents, 60 teachers and 3 principals. Leong found that among the objectives of schooling, the majority of the respondents highly endorsed 'success in examination' and 'vocational preparation'.

Maznah Ismail (1992/93) explored indirectly the students' views of schooling through examining their perception of an effective teacher. She found that five teacher attributes highly ranked by the students were:

(i) Knowledgeable
(ii) Responsible
(iii) Caring
(iv) Humane
(v) Fair

With respect to teacher teaching skills, 82.4% of the students stressed teacher's ability to provide clear explanation of the lesson.

With regard to teaching outcomes of an effective teacher, the students indicated the following five highly ranked outcomes:

(i) Pupils' success in the examination
(ii) Pupils are well disciplined
(iii) Pupils understand what the teacher teaches
(iv) Pupils are hardworking
(v) Good teacher-pupil relationship

Results from these studies clearly indicate strong students' support for the instrumental role and vocational preparation of schooling. While these studies have provided some information of the students' view of schooling, there is a need to address the issue in more depth and more directly from the perspectives of the students.

Working from the perspective that students are active participants and interpreters of their classroom experiences, the study sought to understand their views by inviting them to write essays to express their opinions freely about their schooling.

1.7 Purpose Of The Paper

The purpose of this paper is to report the results of the analysis of a group of female students' responses on the meaning of schooling to them.

2.0 METHODOLOGY

The study of students' perceptions of schooling involved 1368 Form I and Form II students (aged between 13 to 15 years; 798 boys and 570 girls) who were attending three schools in the state of Penang. They were invited to write on the meaning of schooling to them. They were free to express their opinions in any language they wished and many of them wrote their essays in Bahasa Malaysia [the Malaysian National Language] or in English. They were also assured that their opinions would be kept confidential.

From 1368 essays, 300 (21.9%) were selected randomly for analysis. To code the students' responses, a coding scheme was devised based on a sample of the responses from the students. 15 themes were identified. Table 2 shows the themes and the examples to illustrate each theme.

Table 2: Themes In Meaning Of Schooling

	Themes	Examples Of Responses
1.	Social	• Can get to know many friends
2.	Knowledge	• To get more knowledge
3.	Vocational	• To get a good job
4.	Future	• So that my future is guaranteed.
5.	Gen. Success	• For my success
6.	Academic Success	• To get excellent results in examinations
7.	Material Success	• How to manage your money; enjoy prosperity
8.	Ambition	• To go to the university
9.	Moral	• Become a useful person
10.	Discipline	• Can discipline us with school rules
11.	Self-Development	• Become healthy and motivated
12.	Fun	• Fun
13.	Tension	• School gives me tension
14.	Expectations	• I want my parents to be proud of me
15.	Religious Responsibility	• To minister the words of God

A research assistant was trained to use the coding scheme to code the students' responses. To check for intercoder agreement, the researcher independently coded 30 essays written by Form 1 students and 30 essays written by Form 11 students. Intercoder agreement obtained was slightly over 85%.

3.0 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results to be presented are based on the analysis of 100 essays written by a group of female students from one of the schools involved in the study. 50 of the essays were written by Form I girls and 50 essays by Form II girls. For illustration purposes, students' statements were included and where necessary, were translated into English.

This school was and is well known for academic achievement. The students are under pressure to live up to the school and parents' expectations of doing well in the examinations. However, the school also provides various kinds of co-curricular activities. Although the school is located in a rather congested area, the school compound is well maintained. Tree and shrubs beautify the school ground and provide shade for the students to gather or to sit around. The classrooms are spacious, airy and pleasant.

Students' Views of Schooling

Table 3 shows the distribution of the students' responses analysed according to the themes.

Table 3: Distribution Of Responses By Themes

Themes/ Form	Form I (N=50)		Form II (N=50)	
	N	%	N	%
Social (So)	32	64	31	62
Knowledge (Kn)	43	86	41	82
Vocational (Vo)	21	42	15	30
Future (Fu)	25	50	18	36
General Success (Gs)	12	24	13	26
Academic Success (As)	9	18	4	8
Material Success (Ms)	3	6	0	0
Ambition (Am)	16	32	7	14
Moral (Mo)	21	42	11	22
Discipline (Ds)	6	12	7	14
Self-Development (Sd)	14	28	11	22
Fun (Fn)	20	40	13	26
Tension (Tn)	18	36	23	46
Expectations (Ex)	4	8	2	4
Rel. Responsibility (Rr)	0	0	1	2

The results reveal that two themes that were frequently mentioned by both Form I and Form II students were 'Knowledge' and 'Social' themes indicating that the students tended to associate schooling with two functions, which are to get knowledge and to make friends.

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Knowledge' Aspect Of Schooling

86% of Form I and 82 % of Form II students associated schooling with the purpose of getting knowledge and of becoming educated. They mentioned that they learned many new things that were related to academic, social and personal aspects of their lives. For instance, Form I students said that in school, they acquired knowledge and leaned to count, write and think.

Getting good results were important for comparison purposes. For instance, one student said that she liked to get good results in order to gauge her ability in comparison with her friends.

Like Form I students, Form II students also viewed school as a place for acquiring various kinds of knowledge. Apart form academic knowledge, they also mentioned about learning the facts of life and how to get along with other people. For instance, they said that in school they learned to share knowledge with others. School also gave them an opportunity of getting to know other people and leaning about them. According to a Form I student, school could teach all that a person needed to know.

Social Aspect Of Schooling

For many students, schooling meant being with their friends and making new friends. 64% of students of Form I and 62 % of Form II students indicated that the purpose of going to school was to be with their friends. Friends were important for several reasons. Friends provided them emotional support, cheering them whenever they were feeling low and lonely. Friends also helped them in their studies and with whom they could share their problems, thoughts, feelings and establish close and supportive relationships.

In short, for many students school was a social place to meet and interact with their friends who served as sources of information, stimulation, social and emotional support for them. Above all, the students found that school was a fun place to be in.

What makes school a fun place to be in? The answer can be gleaned from the students' responses coded under the theme 'Fun'. The students indicated that beside meeting friends, they could participate in various kinds of co-curricular activities in school. For instance, Form I students said that it was fun to be in school because of the many school clubs and sporting activities that they could participate in.

Form II students also found schooling a fun time, particularly after the examinations when they could joke with the teachers, enjoyed talking and gossiping with their friends and joined in various kinds of school activities.

Thus, the students liked being in school because they could have fun time with their friends in school-organised activities or in various chit -chat and gossip sessions. Other students liked the facilities available in their school. For example, Form I students mentioned enjoying the beautiful surroundings, facilities and food in the canteen.

Moral, Self-Development And Discipline Aspects Of Schooling

These three aspects of schooling are related to the development of the self in non-academic areas such as development of moral values, self-discipline and self-confidence. Form I students placed much emphasis on the function of schooling in instilling in them moral values and good character. They associated schooling with development of good behavior, self-discipline and self-confidence. They said that schooling helped them build their confidence, taught them to be polite, honest, friendly, kind-hearted, generous and to follow the right path. For instance, a Form I student said that by being involved in co-curricular activities in school she learned to be more brave like her friends, like staying at home alone, doing the cooking, washing plates and not always be dependent on others and to do work more systematically and to think more positively.

Form II students also expressed similar views when they said in school they learned moral values, self-discipline, good behavior and to be independent.

Being good children also means fulfilling parental expectations and religious obligations. Under the themes of *Expectations And Religious Responsibility* are statements from both Form I and Form II students about going to school in order to fulfil their parents' expectations.

It is interesting that schooling was also associated with fulfilling religious responsibility. A Form II student said going to school meant that she had to study hard that she might glorify God's name.

Thus, for both Form I and Form II students, schooling played an important role in instilling good moral values, self-confidence and self-discipline. They endorsed this role of schooling because

they also associated schooling with a broader objective of nation building. They associated schooling with fulfilling their responsibilities not only as daughters to their parents but as useful citizens of their country. For instance, a Form II student said that without schooling, there would be no civilization and a progressive society.

Aspects of Schooling Related to Future, Ambitions, Vocational, General Success, Material Success and Academic Success

Students from both Form I and Form II emphasized the instrumental aspect of schooling. They expected that going to school should help them obtain good jobs and a secure future. For instance, Form I students said that without schooling, they would not be able to get a good job. With no job, there would be no one to feed, clothe and give them shelter.

Like Form I students' descriptions of schooling, Form II students' views of schooling also contain many references to the instrumental value of schooling. They associated schooling with getting a job in order to ensure a bright future.

In short, the instrumental aspect of schooling emerged as a significant factor in the students' motivation for schooling. The association between schooling, vocational aspirations and future life is clearly established in the minds of the students.

Tension Aspect of Schooling

Schooling can be fun. But schooling also can be a source of much of tension to the students. The respondents' essays reveal many factors that contributed to their unpleasant experiences in school. Among the factors are the emphasis on academic achievement, school curriculum, teachers' behaviours and teaching strategies, school rules and school system.

Emphasis On Academic Achievement

Being in the school culture that emphasizes academic excellence has channeled the students' energy to focus on the pursuit of academic achievement. Many of the students indicated feeling a lot pressure to be conscientious in their lessons and to perform well in the examinations. For example, several Form I and Form II students indicated that for them schooling meant studying and endless examinations. They tried very hard to do well in the examinations and when they failed to achieve good results, they felt very depressed.

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A From II student aptly described the school as a place where students suffered because their minds were overworked.

The Curriculum

Several students expressed their dislike towards certain school subjects and the school workload. Basically, the school workload bothered them most. They complained of too many exercises to do, too many examines and tests to sit and too many folios and projects to complete.

Teachers' Behaviors And Teaching Strategies

Beside the curriculum, another source of tension for the students was in the form of teachers' behaviours and teaching strategies. They felt very upset when the teachers were in bad mood, ready to scold them, were impatient with them, were impertinent, could not keep their secrets and showed favoritism in the class. The thought of going to school was itself stressful to the students as they tried to guess their teachers' moods. One Form I student said that she prayed that the teacher who was a fierce teacher would not be present in school.

Teachers' teaching strategies were other areas of complaints of the students. They complained that some teachers talked non-stop, did not care whether the students were yawing or not. Other teachers came into the class and asked the students to take out their textbooks. The teachers would read from the textbooks and the students had to copy into their exercise books whatever the teacher was reading.

One Form II student complained that she and her friends were taught English as if they were preschoolers, as if they did not know their nouns from their adjectives. She also wished that instead of having to read the abridged version of 'Sherlock Holmes', they be allowed to read more advanced readers.

School Rules And School System

The students remarked that the school rules and regulations were too strict. They would like to have more leeway in many areas of their school lives. Some of their comments centered around school rules which require them to keep their finger nails short and to wear school uniform which they found boring. They also lamented that the rest period was too short and the school period was too long. They wished for air-conditioning and better washroom facilities.

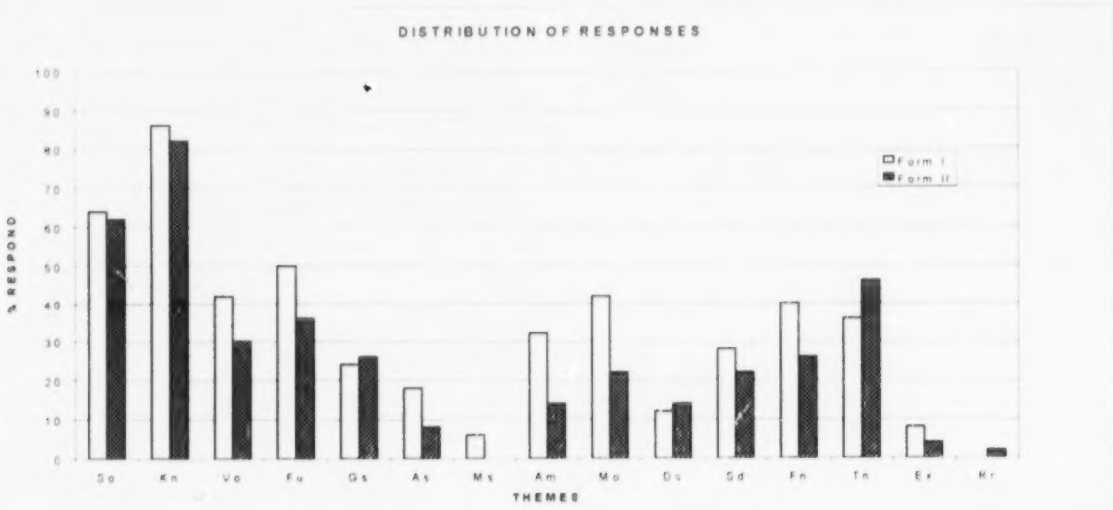
The word 'boring' was often used to describe schooling as in 'school is boring', 'schooling bores me a lot; tons of homework and 'boredom, a dull monotone that repeats itself.' Boredom in school was associated with heavy workload that was unstimulating and monotonous that the students could not escape from.

Tension caused by stress and boredom can make students unmotivated with schoolwork. This point is well brought out by a Form II who said that she did not feel like going to school because of the teachers and of so many books she had to study.

In brief, the students found several aspects of their schooling very stressful. The sources of stress ranged from examination-oriented curriculum, teacher behaviors and instructional strategies and the school system generally.

Comparison Between Form I and Form II Students' Perceptions of Schooling

Table 2 and the diagram on distribution of students' responses show similarities and differences between Form I and Form II views of schooling.



So	:	Social	Mo	:	Moral
Kn	:	Knowledge	Ds	:	Discipline
Vo	:	Vocational	Sd	:	Self-Development
Gs	:	General Success	Fn	:	Fun
As	:	Academic Success	Tn	:	Tension
Ms	:	Material Success	Ex	:	Expectations
Am	:	Ambition	Rr	:	Rel. Responsibility

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There is much overlap in Form I and Form II students' views with respect to 'Knowledge" and 'Social' aspects of schooling. However, they differed somewhat with regard to most of the other aspects of schooling. Compared to Form II students, more Form I students endorsed those aspects of schooling that were future oriented such as 'Vocational', 'Future,''Academic Success' and 'Ambition'. Other aspects of schooling mentioned by more Form I students are 'Moral' and 'Self-development'. In addition, more Form I students found schooling a fun experience.

Form I students' opinions of schooling might be seen as upholding the traditional views of education espoused by the adults. Being recently promoted from the primary level to the secondary level in a highly regarded school, the students would be very aware of their parents' and school's expectations of them. At the same time, they also derived a certain amount of pride being placed in a school well known for outstanding academic achievement. Thus, throughout their essays, there were clear indications of striving for academic excellence, which was seen as a prerequisite for career advancement, and for personal and social development. The struggle to be successful in both areas had also left many of them in stressful situations.

Like Form I students, Form II students also strived to excel in academic field as well as in personal development. However, their most pressing concern was getting ready for the national examination, Peperiksaan Menegah Rendah (PMR) [the Lower Middle School national examination] that they would be sitting the following year. The examination grades obtained would decide in which school, streams and classes they would be placed. Therefore, it is imperative to get good grades in PMR for placement purposes. The effect of the impending examination can be clearly seen in the data on 'Tension' aspect of schooling. Compared to Form I students, more Form II students reported incidences of mental and emotional strains.

For Form I students, the PMR examination was a couple of years way. Besides, their immediate attention was focused on getting adjusted to the new school environment, new demand and expectations. These external demands came at a time when these students were at a point of undergoing rapid biological and psychological changes. Hamburg (1993) earlier observed that the collision of the external and internal changes could make adolescence a stressful time for many youngsters and their families. Hence, the tension that they were experiencing would be of more general kind, rather than being solely focused on examination.

Schooling In Relation To The Development of The Self

Adolescence has been characterized as a period of active engagement in the search and formation of identity (Erikson, 1960; Harter, 1990). The adolescents' struggle to establish an identity is well captured in the term 'becoming somebody' introduced by Wexler (1992). In this regard, school is an important place as it provides the adolescents the opportunity to interact with their friends in their effort of searching, defining and testing their identities, that is to 'become somebody' in the eyes of their peers.

However, Wexler also notes that the identities that the students are struggling to achieve are different for students from different social-economic backgrounds. Thus, in a social group that places a high premium on academic achievement as reflected in the school culture in this study, the school system becomes a viable path for academically oriented students to acquire a self-image as a successful person. The system, however, does not cater to the needs of the students who are academic failures. As Tan (1994) has shown, these non-academic youths have sought other avenues to become somebody, avenues which more often than not are in collision with the norms and values of the school. They have become somebody in the eyes of their peers but to the public, they are 'deviant' or 'anti-school.'

For those students who subscribe to the school culture which emphasizes the pursuit of academic and vocational success and the acquisition of the qualities of a good person, the task of juggling among these demands can made their lives very stressful.

4.0 CONCLUSION

The students' essays on the meaning of schooling are rich sources of information about their perceptions and interpretations of their lives in school. Through their writings, they have provided us with an insight into their struggles, triumphs and hopes in their labour of learning. When seen in a broader perspective, their views of schooling help us to focus our attention on the larger concern of adolescents, which is negotiating the process of becoming somebody in the eyes of people who were significant in their lives.

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